



# TOWN OF CHATHAM

OFFICE OF THE SELECTMEN

TOWN MANAGER

549 Main Street, Chatham, Massachusetts, 02633  
508-945-5100



Ms. Luisa Paiewonsky  
Administrator, Highway Division  
Massachusetts Department of Transportation  
10 Park Plaza, Suite 3170  
Boston, Massachusetts 02116

January 12, 2011

Re: Mitchell River Bridge, Chatham, MA.

Dear Ms. Paiewonsky:

On behalf of the Chatham Board of Selectmen, I am writing you in your capacity as the senior state official of MassDOT responsible for construction, maintenance, and operation of the Commonwealth's bridges.

This letter is to inquire about the process for rebuilding or replacing the Mitchell River Bridge in Chatham, and to further request from you an answer regarding the status of the state funding for this project now that the Keeper of the National Register of Historic Places has found that the Mitchell River Bridge is eligible for the National Register. Let me explain why we seek your guidance at this time.

At the inception of this project last year, a majority of members of the Chatham Board of Selectmen expressed a general preference for rebuilding or replacing the bridge with a design and materials that adhere to the historic timber drawbridge that has existed for over 150 years.

However, on August 17, 2010, officials from MassDOT and the Federal Highway Administration informed the Board that it would not be possible to replace the current Bridge with a timber-built structure. Mr. Shoukry Elnahal, Director of the Accelerated Bridge Replacement Program at the time, stated the Accelerated Bridge Program could not approve or fund a wooden bridge, even if the Keeper found the bridge to be eligible for the National Register. He also indicated his office had halted all design while awaiting the Keeper's decision about the historical significance of the bridge. In addition, the Massachusetts State Historic Preservation Office had recently ruled the Bridge was not eligible for placement on the National Register of Historic Places and, therefore, did not qualify for protected status under Section 106 of the federal Historic Preservation Act of 1966. Given these official representations, the Chatham Board of Selectmen voted to support MassDOT's preliminary proposed redesign of the Mitchell River Bridge as a concrete and steel bridge with wood and stone cladding.

Since then, we received news on October 14, 2010 that the Keeper of the National Register had found that the Bridge was, in fact, eligible for the National Register. The Keeper declared the Mitchell River Bridge was "rare" and "of exceptional significance as the last remaining single-leaf wooden drawbridge in Massachusetts (and perhaps in the entire United States)" and "an exceptionally important part of the community's historic identity." This finding was the exact position enunciated by the Friends of the Mitchell River Wooden Drawbridge when MassDOT representatives met with us on August 17th.

The Keeper's finding has caused the Chatham Board of Selectmen to reevaluate its earlier decision of August 17, 2010. We now conclude that renewed attention should be given to the desire to reduce or eliminate the possibility that the existing Bridge will be demolished and rebuilt as something other than a timber drawbridge. At the same time, and as financial stewards of the Town, we also wish to seek your official assurance that honoring the Keeper's decision and federal law will not cause MassDOT to withdraw or substantially reduce the state funding that was allotted to this Chatham project under the Accelerated Bridge Program.

Our request for clarification is prompted by more recent events. In the months since the Keeper's finding in October, Town staff members have discussed with your representatives, Mr. Shoukry Elnahal,

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and the newly-appointed Project Manager, Mr. Joseph Pavao, Jr., how best to proceed with the Section 106 process and to rebuild the existing bridge with funds from the Accelerated Bridge Program.

In these discussions it became apparent the current bridge design proposed by MassDOT apparently has not changed, and remains essentially identical to the concrete-and-steel design proposed many months prior to the Keeper's landmark decision. What is more, your representatives have again stated they have no intention of rebuilding a timber superstructure or to place wooden pilings in the water -- i.e., rebuild a wooden substructure -- thus making it clear that, as of this date, they are rejecting a timber drawbridge.

These statements appear to differ from your own positive assurances, as reported in the Boston Globe of October 22, 2010, in which you are quoted as stating, "We didn't expect that [the bridge] would be deemed historically significant, but they [the Keeper of the National Register] are more expert than we are, and that's why we take it seriously." and "This represents a challenge to us. But . . . I think we'll end up with a bridge that everybody's proud of."

We infer this to mean that you will use your best efforts to rebuild the existing bridge as a timber drawbridge, in accordance with Section 106 and Section 4(f) of the Transportation Act, and trust that you will confirm this to us. Should you believe, however, that a wooden drawbridge need not be rebuilt, then we would ask you to provide us with the scientific evidence and engineering data upon which this decision is being made.

We will greatly appreciate your personal response to this letter and our concerns so that we, as a Board, may fully understand the current position of MassDOT prior to the commencement of discussions under the Section 106 process, which are scheduled to begin this month.

In closing, let me further express that the Chatham Board of Selectmen and our Town staff members are keenly interested in continuing to cooperate with you and your staff to successfully complete this unique project under the Accelerated Bridge Program and provide Chatham with a bridge in which all parties can indeed take pride.

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Leonard M. Sussman,  
Chairman  
Chatham Board of Selectmen

cc: Mr. Shoukry Elnahal, MassDOT  
Mr. Joseph Pavao, Jr., MassDOT  
Town of Chatham Board of Selectmen  
William Hinchey, Chatham Town Manager  
Terry Whalen, Chatham Town Planner  
Jeff Colby, Chatham DPW Director  
Chatham Capital Projects Review Committee  
Friends of the Mitchell River Wooden Drawbridge, c/o Norman Pacun  
Richard Marquis, FHWA,  
Jeff Shrimpton, MassDOT  
Brona Simon, Massachusetts Historical Commission  
Don Aikman, Chatham Historical Commission